

THEATRE AND PSYCHE

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Abstract:

The logos of the soul requires a way of seeing outside of the positive, everyday seeing which ego consciousness utilizes. By exploring the kind of seeing we find in the theatrical event, (specifically the complex relationship between audience and performer) and comparing theatre with Jung's writings on dream and active imagination, themes of reflexivity and reciprocity are highlighted. A reading of Euripides' *Bacchae* reveals that to see the psychic image means to be seen by it and that this reflexive *theoria* is Dionysian, displaying a logos that, through its profoundly paradoxical nature moves beyond the subject/object dichotomy.

Keywords:

Theatre, Jung on Active Imagination, Seeing the psychic image, Dionysian, Paradox, Subject/Object.

Image, Psyche, Logos

One of the most important aspects of Jung's psychology is his emphasis on the primacy of image. This not only frees it from the positivistic theoretical assumptions behind Freud's work, and that of his followers, but it also enables an approach to psyche which acknowledges the importance of full reflexivity. We thus come to see, for example that the idea of scientific observation which underlies the modern worldview is a mirage: we cannot perceive without being perceived: the psychic image requires participation, outside of objectivity and subjectivity. Jung's is then an approach that sustains paradox and does not avoid it. The logos that enables this, truly psychological, perspective is a Dionysian logos¹.

This paper is not concerned with what occurs in the actual analytical encounter between persons. The true subject matter of psychology is the soul. I am therefore occupied here with the question: what are we engaged in when we work with soul. It is in attempting to answer this fundamental question that we can learn a great deal from the logos of Dionysus, and specifically the Dionysus of the theatre. The world of theatre is itself a world of paradox – an upside down realm where oppositions such as subject/object, self/other, cause/effect no longer hold. This liminal world is equivalent to the imaginal realm, the world of soul, a locus neither literal nor spiritual but somehow mediating between the two. The vision of theatre is speculative, though the reflection it allows stems not from a literal representation of positive fact, an external reflection, but from an internal reflection by which the positive is dissolved into a negative Dionysian dismemberment. In theatre, the actor as positive person is subsumed and lost in the role, becoming neither real nor unreal, but something else, playing between the two. There are similarities between this event and the ritual

event, whereby the participant is absorbed into the role or spirit that he represents. Crucially, theatre goes beyond this by virtue of the presence of the audience, which both witnesses and takes part in what occurs. This distance between audience and performance makes room for detachment and reflection. Without it there is simply a tuning into the archetypal realm, which in itself is not a psychological act. Historically theatre occurs when consciousness becomes self-aware.

Mythological/ritual consciousness entails a thorough participation in a world where there is no split between man and the gods, or matter and spirit. With the awareness of this split comes a different kind of consciousness which requires a new reflective mediation. There is a parallel here in alchemy, which also marks a shift from an attitude of consciousness whereby myth and ritual are experienced 'as though they had come into existence without man's intervention, in such a way that the collaboration of the psyche – an indispensable factor – remains invisible' (Jung, 1956, §498), towards the idea of an 'opus' in which the 'human intervention is explicit in the figure of the adept and his operations and is a focus of attention in addition to the other focus, the phenomena or images in the retort.'(Giegerich, 1998, p.136) Giegerich's description of alchemy as a place where there are two elements: the transformations of mythology represented 'objectively' as events *and* a reflecting subject observing them, would serve as a pretty good definition of theatre.

The audience cannot just sit back in a distanced way (as in cinema, or television) and observe the drama. Whether it wants to or not, it is pulled into the vessel, as it were, and its very presence affects what occurs. Moreover in the greatest theatre, which works also as *metatheatre*, the very ambiguity of the event, its radically fictional aspect, serves to unsettle the unthinking positivistic assumptions of the audience, so that the world henceforth assumes a new aspect.

Theatre is all about seeing. That is what 'theatre' means. It derives from the Greek word θέατρον (theatron), which means a place for seeing. It is closely related to the word *theoria*. As Jung points out, 'every psychic process, so far as it can be observed as such, is essentially *theoria*,

that is to say it is a presentation'. (Jung, 1946, §162) Actually the presentation and the observation are one. As Jung emphasises, 'Never forget that in psychology the *means* by which you judge and observe the psyche is the *psyche* itself... The psyche is not only the *object* but also the *subject* of our science.' (Jung, 1935, §277) If we wish to engage with psyche on its own terms, and like Jung maintain both that, 'the psyche is always speaking about itself' (Jung, 1954, §483) and, 'image is psyche' (Jung, 1929, §75) then it is crucial that we think about what it means to engage with image. The metaphor of theatre provides this and it does so because it is essentially dialectical, thus allowing room for the many faceted reflexivities that we come up against when we start to involve ourselves in image and how to look at it.

The Essence of Theatre

Just as in alchemy the *vas* is both vessel and opus, theatre is an event but it is also a place, a marked out liminal area which Peter Brook has described as 'the empty space'. It resembles the Tao – empty and formless yet with the potential to contain an infinity of things. It is a place of Truth, in Heidegger's sense, *aletheia*: "the dynamic emergence of being into the light of manifestness and a simultaneous persistence in hiddenness and concealment". (Avens, 1984, p.18) The paradox is profoundly Dionysian. Here in this event/place occurs the mirror play of the world, in which soul and nature mirror each other. In the Greek theatre, the spectator, seated on a hillside under the open heavens, participated in an interplay of earth, sky, gods and mortals.

A keyword of the Dionysian is 'fluidity'. Theatre allows a fluidity of place, time and identity. With a prop or a mere word a performer can locate the action of the play wherever he wishes. Within a single act the audience may be whisked from one country to another, from a warm room to a wind-blown heath. But not only may a few words enable us to cross continents, we can leap forward twenty years or back two thousand. Or, as in Japanese Noh theatre, time may become

extraordinarily slow and concentrated through the absolute economy and discipline of the actor, who although he can take five minutes to reach the centre of the stage, nonetheless can travel from one province to another in a single step. What is remarkable is that an audience is not at all disturbed by this elasticity of time and place. Within the fictional envelope almost anything can occur and be accepted, not as reality, but as 'reality'. One place can flow into another, one time into another time, one person into another person. Psychologically this corresponds to the dissolution of the positivities of ego perspective, the apparently rigid discrete entities which in our everyday consciousness we perceive as *this* person, *this* place, or *this* time. Evidently, this has much in common with the dream-world, where similar fluidities exist. The transformation which occurs in the theatrical vessel may also be paralleled by that of the alchemical where every coagulation requires a dissolution. This parallel reminds us that just as in alchemy the substance remains somehow the same, despite all the operations upon it, so it is that theatrical transformations are not post-modern infinite substitutions, whereby anything can be anything else, but revelations of deeper truths, paradoxically performed through fictional means.

There are then two ways of seeing: one the positive, concrete, everyday mode by means of which we sit in a room and witness some actors dressing up, moving around the stage and declaiming, (or as Ralph Richardson once defined acting: 'Shouting in the evening') and the other which is the way of imagination, the Dionysian way, in which we both inhabit and are inhabited by the images we witness. If we employ the former approach, we remain in duality: I, the subject, look at you, the object, separated and ultimately untouched. Nothing can occur because I remain in the fastness of my subjective ego consciousness, and from there the world is unanimated and flat. But if we are taken by the Dionysian perspective we open ourselves to a paradoxical universe in which subject and object lose their solidity and we experience a fluidity of place, time and identity that can be transforming.

In theatre, unbeknownst to itself, the audience is a crucial participant. Without it there is no theatrical event. Just as the audience is reacting to all that it witnesses, with laughter, gasps or simply a pregnant silence, so the performers are constantly aware of and reacting to the contribution of the audience. The audience is, therefore, *not* a passive consumer of the events on stage but a true participant inasmuch as it partakes of a fully reciprocal relationship with the performers.

Actor, Audience, Mask, Dream

When actors perform, they are disclosing an image. What is of interest, psychologically, is the relation of this image to the witnessing audience. The actor of Greek theatre wore a mask. This masking enables us to concentrate our attention on the difference between the actor qua person and the actor qua actor. The crucial aspect of the mask is that it is all surface, it has no reverse side. In the theatrical arena, this is its most important value. In the Greek language the word for mask is *πρόσωπον* (prosopon), which contains the meanings, face, aspect, person and stage figure. As John Jones says, ‘The face is the total aspect; it presents the human individual, the person. Therefore to say that the mask is a kind of face is to take it very seriously indeed.’ (Jones, 1962, p.44) For the Greeks then the mask was a presentation of the person, as rendered by theatre. It served to take the audiences attention away from the human being who happened to be behind the mask. ‘At the living heart of the tradition the actor is the mask and the mask is an artifact-face with nothing to offer but itself.’ (Jones, 1962, p.45) This then enables us to see what Aristotle means when he says that, ‘Tragedy is an imitation not of human beings but of action and life.’ (Poetics, 50a 16-22) He is emphasising that what is presented in theatre is the presentation of a whole image, in which the masked actor is only a part, albeit an important one.

There is a strong, and much remarked, parallel between theatre and dream. Jung, as is well known, compared the structure of the dream to that of a Greek tragedy, laying out four stages:

Exposition; Development; Culmination; and Lysis. (Jung, 1948, §561 ff.) Others have pointed out that dreams rarely show this ideal structure. (Hillman, 1983, p.37) It seems to me that Jung was right to compare the dream to drama, though perhaps not in the way he did so. Like tragedy in Aristotle's definition, the dream too is an image, not of human beings but of action and life: the action and life of the psyche. The 'persons' of the dream are not human beings, however much they may resemble them and our interpretation of a dream will go wrong if we identify the father in the dream with the real, human, father. Just as there is a temptation, when looking at a dream, to identify with the image of the dreamer, the dream-ego, so in theatre we can easily find ourselves rooting for the hero. Yet, even in tragedy this is a mistake, according to Aristotle, for what we are watching is an imitation of an *action*, not the adventure of a hero.

Unlike other, more purely literary, forms of narrative, the drama is radically decentred. In epic we follow the heroic progress of a single figure. In the novel, the writer's voice unifies the perspective. But theatre presents a number of independent figures, each telling its own story. As Robert Dupree puts it, 'Each character is a symbol, bearing its own 'atmosphere' independently of the others. The characters exist in relation to each other only through the spectator, without whom the drama cannot exist.' (Dupree, 1980, p.219) Patricia Berry has warned against allowing the interpretation of the dream, seen as narrative, to become the ego's trip, (Berry, 1982, pp.67ff) and it seems to me that to view the dream as a drama rather than a story can help to counter this. Von Franz says,

One can understand every dream as a drama in which we ourselves are *everything*, that is the author, director, actors, and prompter, as well as the spectators. If one tries to understand the dream in this way, the result is a startling realisation for the dreamer of what is happening in him psychically, 'behind his back,' so to speak. The surprise may be experienced as painful, as joyful, or as enlightening, depending on how he accepts the dream-play in consciousness. (Von Franz, 1998, pp. 3-4)

The parallel with theatre is apt because the spectator in the theatre, when fully involved in the play, is indeed *everything*. He participates emotionally in the play as a whole, while throughout retaining the detachment of a spectator. It is then possible to experience the kind of response which von Franz describes with regard to the dream: 'The understanding of such dreams leads *eo ipso* to a change in one's conscious views of things experienced outwardly, as well as – and this is what concerns us – a change in our view of ourselves.' (Von Franz, 1998, p.4)

This is a change which only occurs when our ingrained habit of dividing our ego as subject from everything else as object is radically challenged and we attain the insight that to see something truly is also, in some sense, to be seen by it. In von Franz's words, 'One sees oneself for a moment through the eyes of another, of something objective which views one from the outside, as it were.' (Von Franz, 1998, p.7) This experience can be felt as deeply threatening.

To stick to the image of the dream means, then, to see the dream as a whole, as a representation of psychological action. After all, as Jung says,

'The self only exists inasmuch as you appear. Not that you are, but that you do is the self. The self appears in your deeds and deeds always mean relationship; a deed is something that you produce which is practically outside of you, between yourself and your surroundings, between subject and object – there the self is visible.' (Jung, 1934-9, p.795)

Jung also emphasises that, 'In myths and fairytales, as in dreams, the soul speaks about itself, and the archetypes reveal themselves in their natural interplay, as 'formation, transformation / eternal Mind's eternal recreation,' (Jung, 1954, §400 Trans. Giegerich in Giegerich, 1998) later adding, '...we are not saying anything *about* the psyche, but the psyche is always speaking about *itself*.' (Jung, 1954,

§483) Those of us who profess to be analytical psychologists are concerned not with persons and their problems, but with the soul and what it says about itself.

The Bacchae: Dionysus and Theatre

Euripides' *Bacchae* is uniquely valuable for this enquiry because it is a play which concerns itself simultaneously with the god Dionysus and the nature of theatre itself. As Charles Segal says,

'By bringing Dionysus himself on the stage and symbolically enacting the power of Dionysiac illusion, Euripides raises and explores the question of how the falsehood of (dramatic) fiction can bring us truth, how by surrendering ourselves and losing ourselves to the power of imagination we can in some measure find ourselves, discover or recover some hidden, unfamiliar part of our identity.' (Segal, 1997, p.217)

In the first place, Dionysus stands before the audience, or rather, a man playing the role of a god appears on the stage. As the play unfolds the god pretends to be a man, or rather the actor playing the role pretends to be a god pretending to be a man. The audience is required to have a kind of double vision. On the one hand, it is fully involved in what occurs on stage: We are told that when in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* the furies entered, women miscarried and children fainted. On the other hand, as we have seen there is also a sense of detachment. This distance allows the audience to appreciate the play as a whole and crucially encourages reflection on what it witnesses. Without the involvement, the experience of taking part in the performance, the reflection would be valueless. And without the detached reflection there would be merely a loss of consciousness. This doubleness of perspective is profoundly Dionysian: He is a god who is both very near and very distant and as we have seen his mask symbolises his double epiphany.

Throughout the play, Euripides emphasizes the theme of illusion. Dionysus creates various apparitions which confuse and undermine Pentheus' sense of his own authority: Again and again the attention of the audience is drawn to the illusions which the god can bring, and by extension, to the fictive, symbolic aspect of a theatre in which we never see what is literally there. This Dionysian seeing is an experience, which carries meaning only if all those involved, actors and audience, enter the de-literalised world of imagination. The structures of authority in everyday life need, like Pentheus' palace, to crash to the ground, revealing themselves as yet another imaginal construct.

Theatre is a place for seeing, and how you see is important. Euripides points to the radical otherness of the Dionysian perspective by his repeated use of verbs for 'seeing' in the play. The most important of these occurs when Pentheus first interrogates the stranger about his god. He asks him, 'How did you see him? In a dream, or face to face?' (468) For Pentheus, there are only two ways to see, one valid and one invalid, either the god was there or he wasn't. The stranger replies obliquely: ὄρωὼν ὄρωὼντα', 'I saw him seeing me'. As Vernant says, this reply

stresses that the god's epiphany has nothing to do with the dichotomy that shapes the convictions of Pentheus...The vision demanded by the masked god is something far beyond those two forms of knowledge, of which it makes a mockery. It is based on the meeting of two gazes in which (as in the interplay of reflecting mirrors), by the grace of Dionysus, a total reversibility is established between the devotee who sees and the god who is seen, where each one is, in relation to the other, at once the one who sees and the one who makes himself seen. (Vernant, 1990, p.393)

The relation of audience to actor similarly partakes of this reversibility, as does the relation of actor to role.

Moreover, the relation of the ego to that radical otherness which constitutes the unconscious psyche is far from being that of subject observing object. When we encounter the unconscious psyche, it may sometimes feel as though we are observers, but if we are open to the experience, it may quite as often be a case of us being observed. The dichotomy itself ceases to bear meaning. Better is the pregnant phrase, 'ὄρῶν ὄρῶντα', 'I saw him seeing me'.

As long as we distance ourselves from the experience of otherness that the unconscious and everything that it brings us necessarily possesses, pretending that we are not *in* it but 'just looking', then we will be like the Guard in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, who looked at Alice 'first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera-glass. At last he said, 'You're going the wrong way,' and shut up the window and went away.' To the ordinary day-vision of subject and object, the unconscious does indeed appear to be going 'the wrong way'.

In *Mysterium Coniunctionis* Jung talks about the experience of active imagination and in two places he uses the image of the theatre as the one best suited to his subject. First, he gives a practical description of what the active imaginer can expect. As the images begin to flow, he says, we can either sit back and enjoy it as an entertainment *out there*, or we may start to see that 'The piece that is being played does not want merely to be watched impartially, it wants to compel [the imaginer's] *participation*. If [the imaginer] understands that his own drama is being performed on this inner stage, he cannot remain indifferent to the plot and its denouement.' (Jung, 1955-6, §706)

Later Jung comes back to this image. He talks about the way in which modern man may experience the reality of the psychic process: 'Although, to a certain extent, he looks on from outside, impartially, he is also an acting and suffering figure in the drama of the psyche.' (Jung, 1955-6, §753) So long as you just stare at the pictures, Jung says, nothing transformative happens and nothing will happen. But...

If you recognize your own involvement, you yourself must enter into the process with your personal reactions, just as if you were one of the fantasy figures, or rather, *as if the drama being enacted before your eyes were real*. It is a psychic fact that this fantasy is happening, and it *is as real as you - as a psychic entity - are real*. (Jung, 1955-6, §753)

Jung introduces these passages by saying that the active imaginer must stare at his ‘contemptible fantasy’ until one day his eyes will open, ‘or as the alchemists say, until the fish’s eyes, or the sparks, shine in the dark solution.’ (Jung, 1955-6, §752) This reference is significant because it takes us back to a passage in ‘On the Nature of the Psyche’ in which Jung states that in his view these multiple luminosities correspond to tiny conscious phenomena. (Jung, 1954b, §388-396) What is striking here is the way in which Jung plays with ideas of subjectivity and objectivity. The active imaginer is portrayed both as an audience member who sees his personal dramas played out on the stage *and* as an acting suffering figure in the drama of the psyche. This is underscored by the reference to the alchemist who, we are told, starts to *see* at the exact moment when the fishes’ eyes start to shine, i.e. when he begins to *be seen*.

We have then three crucial areas where image is observed: the dream regarded by the dreamer, the *vera imaginatio* of the active imaginer, and the *opus alchemicum* of the artifex. All three acknowledge a complex mixture of observation, participation and detachment and this is precisely what we find in the theatrical model.

In the Bacchae, Dionysus reveals his logos: to see psychologically, i.e. through the imagination, we must forfeit our separate, observer status and become what we see. The audience’s involvement in the play, and the actor’s involvement in his role, requires precisely this creative, imaginative, truly psychological abdication of ‘self’ as radically separate subject. This step involves a giving up of the Cartesian model of observing subject and dead object. Pentheus desires to view what fascinates him

while at the same time remaining immune from it. This is an example of what Giegerich has called the contraceptive theory of knowledge, '... a longing for knowledge that allows contact with what is to be known only if 'contraceptives' are used.' (Giegerich, 1999, p.253) The bleak irony of this scene is that what Pentheus believes to be a 'contraceptive', the maenad costume, identifies him as one of those who have given themselves up to Dionysian knowledge, and thus one who must undergo the fate of both god and victim: dismemberment. Thus the costume here acts like a mask in that it seems to conceal but actually reveals a deeper truth. This irony is deepened when Pentheus, now dressed as a maenad, asks coyly, 'Do I look like anyone, like Ino or my mother Agave?' Both parts, mother and son, would have been played by the same actor. Moreover, as Pentheus, in women's clothes, asks the effeminate stranger how he looks, the audience witnesses a strange doubling, almost a mirroring, which itself echoes Pentheus' 'I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens. And now two Thebes, two cities...' (918).

It is impossible to analyse fully the effect of these different layers of metaphor on an audience, but what is certain is that all positivistic certainty has been long since shed. As audience members taking part in a theatrical event, our vision is already doubled but here Euripides masterfully ensures that we have the queasy experience of looking at a mirror reflecting a mirror reflecting a mirror... Pentheus' desire to become a spectator, to watch safely from afar, reminds us that this is what we, as audience members, seem to be engaged in. However, far from being an objective witness of events, a hidden onlooker, Pentheus is to become the protagonist in what ensues and full though unwilling participant in the drama. Indeed his participation 'will prove necessary to the full performance of the rites that he would witness' (Segal, 1997, p.225), and this tells us that in some sense we too must undergo his fate, by sacrificing the safety of distance and sympathetically experiencing the φόβος and ἔλεος, fear and pity, which according to Aristotle constitute catharsis, and that this itself is necessary for the full performance of the rites of Dionysus.

What we are sacrificing is the Cartesian split of mind and body, inner and outer, objective and subjective, which allows us to observe the world with the security of distance. As analysts, this is a security we cannot afford. As Jung says,

‘The psychotherapist should no longer labour under the delusion that the treatment of neurosis demands nothing more than the knowledge of a technique; he should be absolutely clear in his own mind that psychological treatment of the sick is a *relationship* in which the doctor is involved quite as much as the patient.’ (Jung, 1934, §352)

Conclusion

If we wish to do more than merely pay lip-service to what Jung called the objective psyche, we have to be open to the fact that psychotherapy does not consist of an analyst doing something to a dream, but rather the dream revealing itself to analyst and patient. For this to occur the bright lights of ego consciousness need to be turned down in a kind of *abaissement de niveau mental*, so that it becomes possible to discern the dim phosphorescences emanating from the unconscious, the starry heavens and fishes eyes of the alchemists. As we have seen, in these circumstances it is far from clear what constitutes object and what subject. In such a complex field of interaction it is perhaps more fruitful to talk about the subtle reflexivity and mutuality of vision. This is the arena in which the theatrical model usefully comes into play. The dream is not an anaesthetized patient undergoing intrusive investigation, but a living, shimmering fabric which reveals different facets of itself as the light catches it. It exists only in the meeting of our gaze and its self-revelation, both passive and active. As all we experience is image, this must, in a subtle sense, be true for all human life. When Shakespeare has Prospero say, ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on,’ he refers simultaneously to our status as humans and as actors in ‘the great theatre of the world’, and thus equates dream, life

and theatre. The mysterious and ultimately unanalysable grandeur of the line stems from a deep intuition about the paradoxical nature of the image. It is in its ability to do justice to the complex ambiguities present in this mode of seeing that the theatrical model stands out. It uniquely conveys what it is to touch and be touched by image. Active and passive, present and absent, true and false, engaged and detached, somehow all these, preeminently Dionysian, opposites make up theatre, and also somehow, our relation to the unconscious psyche.

ⁱ James Hillman has drawn a distinction between two conceptions of Dionysus in Jung's writing. (Hillman, 1972, pp.151-64) The first derives from Jung's reading of Nietzsche and has more to do with Wotan than the classical Dionysus. This 'stresses the ecstatic, excessive, barbarian, titanic, even criminal aspects'. The second is more in line with the work of classicists and mythologists such as Kerényi, for whom Dionysus was the image of indestructible life (Kerényi, 1996), Rohde, who emphasised the connection with Hades, the mysteries and the cult of souls (Rohde, 1987) Otto who highlights Dionysus' madness which he sees as expressing the inner antithesis of life and death (Otto, 1965) and Dodds who stressed the freedom and joy of the Dionysian experience in the forgetting of self, station and differences. (Dodds, 1963) It is important to emphasise that my use of the term Dionysian stems from this second Dionysus. My major source is Euripides' *Bacchae*. As an archetypal dominant Dionysus does not need to be opposed to any other. The realm of Dionysus is sufficient unto itself, containing its own oppositions, without recourse to any other god. In brief this Dionysus is primarily paradoxical: somehow maintaining opposites that elsewhere could not be held together: life/death; god/man; male/female; reality/illusion; human/animal; manifest/hidden; present/eternal. It is this paradoxical feature of the god that makes that supremely paradoxical form, theatre, Dionysian.

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